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## THE PLAY COURSE IN HIGH SCHOOL

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There is a place in the high school for an academic course in drama, if the course is wisely planned and sanely taught. Such a course, however, has no connection with plays used as propaganda for the thousand and one causes for which they are now used, nor with play production as a means of raising money, nor even with the dramatic method of presenting other subjects, such as literature and history. These are legitimate activities, but they are outside the play course.

There are two types of play courses, actually given in high schools, which are surely mistaken in their ideals. One of them studies the latest products of Greenwich Village in order to "keep up with the drama." The other teaches acting, lighting, costume design, the art of make-up, and the making of scenery. Neither of these courses should be given in the English department. If the latter course is given at all, it should not advertise itself as a vocational course. To turn out high-school students as trained stage workers is bad both for them and for the stage. If the aims of play courses continue to be so various and so mistaken, the whole movement is in a fair way to be discredited.

But another type of course has a legitimate place in the English department. It presents an organized body of knowledge, it develops skill and power, it trains taste (so needed today in our audiences), and it produces a desirable attitude toward literature and life. More, it uses a literary type which is in the ascendant today—a type that furnishes one of the easiest roads possible to love of good literature.

Such a course should be elective. It should not displace grammar, composition, rhetoric, or the outline courses in English literature. It should stand on a par with special courses in the essay and the novel, which are now offered in many of our large high

schools. It may easily surpass both of them in vital interest, and it is better adapted to young minds than the great novel, which is typically the product of older minds for older minds. And it should be taught as are both these courses for ideas and not primarily for technique.

Two courses of this sort could be organized, either of which would be valuable. I should prefer one with a historical outline and historical sequence. The material for such a course is rich, and it forms a good basis on which to build subsequent courses in other literary forms and more advanced courses in drama, such as the colleges offer. There is little difficulty in arousing interest in the St. Nicholas Interludes, *The Second Shepherd's Play*, *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, *Everyman*, some of Shakespeare's plays not read in the other courses, *The Rivals*, and a few more modern plays. If production is possible without taking too much time from the reading, six scenes which illustrate the development of English comedy make a good program, especially if students give a word or two of explanation pointing out to the audience the peculiarities to be looked for.

If a course in modern dramas should seem preferable for any reason, it can be made a solid cultural course; but even in such a course it seems a pity not to include some classics for rapid reading, because modern plays easily bridge the gap in interest and lead to a real appreciation of the older dramas.

In a modern course, it is possible to cover a great amount of reading. Since the plays vary widely in difficulty, it seems wise to divide them into two classes: many that are to be read outside of class for enjoyment pure and simple, and a few that need class study for their understanding. For outside reading, there are such short plays as Alice Brown's *Joint Owners in Spain*, Zona Gale's *The Neighbors*, Arthur Hopkins' *Moonshine*, Pinero's *Playgoers*, Goodman's *Dust of the Road*, Dunsany's *Fame and the Poet*, *A Night at an Inn*, and any of Lady Gregory's Irish plays. But the list should not include the usual type of curtain raiser, nor should it include the cynical and sophisticated plays of the Washington Square type. There are plenty of other plays with interesting plots, good ideas, and sound technique.

For discussion in class, more difficult plays should be chosen. Pupils like to measure their progress and they have more respect for themselves, the teacher, and the course if things are not made too easy. But "difficult" here means intellectually difficult, not emotionally beyond their experience. The following plays have been found within the reach of a twelfth-grade class: Galsworthy's *The Little Man*, Yeats's *The Hour Glass* and *The Land of Heart's Desire*, Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, MacKaye's *The Cat-Boat*, Drinkwater's *X=O: A Night of the Trojan War*, Witter Bynner's *The Little King*, Bennett's *The Tille*, Peabody's *The Piper*, MacKaye's *The Scarecrow*, and Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*, *The Betrothal*, and *The Death of Tintagiles*. The list could easily include fifty plays without touching anything that is not thoroughly wholesome.

These plays have been chosen because they have ideas worth presenting, because they are difficult enough to encourage study without sacrificing interest, because they are not so difficult intellectually or emotionally that their use seems unwise, and because they have real literary value. They can be taught by anyone who loves them enough and cares enough for his students to win the confidence that such caring always brings.

Teaching content does not absolutely exclude any use of technique. Wherever calling attention to technical dexterity adds to enjoyment and helps to develop a sense of form, it is not out of place. But when technique is taught as a body of information, it distorts the real purpose of the course.

Whether or not students should be asked to write simple plays is a debatable question. It seems that college professors believe that drama-writing courses should exist only in graduate schools. But they would not quarrel with us if our aim were not to produce playwrights but to get simple plays for our own production and to develop appreciation of form through creating. A bill made up of home-made plays has often entertained a school and parent audience. One boy in a Detroit school wrote a Thrift play, which, through no effort of his, found its way into *John Martin's Book* and later into the *Ladies' Home Journal*. But this publicity, grateful as it was, did not make him think himself a playwright;

instead he is studying business administration at college. There are many cases of student plays that have been produced by neighboring high schools. To this extent the writing of plays seems wholly legitimate if it does not trespass too much on the grounds of the other aims.

Play production by the class is a most tempting activity. It serves many ends; better speech, a goal for composition, and a reason for cultivating desirable personal traits. Surely it justifies itself if it can be kept from overshadowing the true academic end of the course. Every teacher must decide for himself to what extent he can safely use it.

If the other departments of the school care to offer courses in lighting, scenery building, costume design, and make-up, surely the English department may co-operate. But care has to be exercised that such activities do not become so engrossing that they rob all the other subjects in the curriculum. In any event English credit should not be given for them. The boy who presented to an eastern college two hours of "face make-up" credit and "history of costume" among his English credits must have created quite a sensation. But he did it seriously, because these courses had been credited as English in the high school from which he came.

There is room, then, surely for the right kind of play course—if the individual student has room for it. Production should be incidental; play-writing and the study of technique must not run away with the course; the main stress should be laid on the reading of wholesome literary plays, plays of ideas, and plays difficult enough to produce mental growth.

If a play course within these limits is adapted to the needs of any school, it will not meet opposition from the school heads, nor will it be banned by the colleges, who will welcome a sound basis in any literary form in the students we send to them. But if the extreme, faddish, erratic course continues on its way unchecked, it will bring about its own abolition, which is devoutly to be hoped for; but it may take with it the sound and sensible play course, which has a value too great to merit such an end.